

Review: Jens Brockmeier (2015). Beyond the Archive: Memory, Narrative, and the Autobiographical Process

Bietti, Lucas M.

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Bietti, L. M. (2016). Review: Jens Brockmeier (2015). Beyond the Archive: Memory, Narrative, and the Autobiographical Process. [Review of the book *Beyond the archive: memory, narrative, and the autobiographical process*, by J. Brockmeier]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 17(3), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-17.3.2695>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more Information see:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Review:

Lucas M. Bietti

Jens Brockmeier (2015). *Beyond the Archive: Memory, Narrative, and the Autobiographical Process*. New York: Oxford University Press; 424 pages; ISBN 978-0-19-986156-9; \$73.16

Key words:

autobiographical
remembering;
archival model;
narrative model;
memory studies

Abstract: Jens BROCKMEIER's new book proposes a very provocative aim for memory studies: "[T]o radically re-think our very idea of memory and challenge the notions of remembering and forgetting that we have taken for granted" (p.vii). The main target for the author's critique is the archival model of memory. In order to support his approach, the author provides empirical evidence from the neurosciences, social sciences, and humanities. "Beyond the Archive" represents an innovative contribution to the field of memory studies. It brings together disparate disciplinary fields in a novel and sophisticated fashion with a clear goal in mind: to propose a new model for the analysis of autobiographical remembering. BROCKMEIER's book is a true exercise of multidisciplinary research in action, which is much needed in the current climate of psychological and neuroscientific reductionism in the sciences of memory.

Table of Contents

- [1. Background](#)
- [2. Structure of the Book](#)
- [3. The End of the Archival Model](#)
- [4. Brain Plasticity](#)
- [5. Narrative Model](#)
- [6. A Minor Critique](#)
- [7. Conclusion](#)

[References](#)

[Author](#)

[Citation](#)

1. Background

It was during my years as a doctoral student in Barcelona, Sydney, and mostly Australia when I truly became interested in the relatively new field of memory studies. As a doctoral student whose aim was to somehow explore how remembering works in everyday life and in conversation, but without completely setting aside the cognitive aspects of memory, Jens BROCKMEIER's work definitely caught my attention, and it has been inspirational ever since. In 2009, I came across a special issue of the *Journal of Cultural Psychology* fully dedicated to "narrative and cultural memory" (BROCKMEIER, 2002). It was edited by Jens BROCKMEIER, and was presented as something of a continuation to the initial work on discursive remembering from the late 1980s and 1990s by discursive psychologists in the U.K. (EDWARDS, MIDDLETON & POTTER, 1992; MIDDLETON & EDWARDS, 1990), but with a new twist: the focus of

BROCKMEIER's work was the narrative and "the self" from a cultural-historical perspective. BROCKMEIER's innovative take on memory brought together topics such as the self, time, culture, and narrative within the framework of cultural-historical activity theory (i.e., ROTH, RADFORD & LaCROIX, 2012). BROCKMEIER's contribution on memory brought a new and original voice to memory studies. Another important conceptual article from BROCKMEIER's work on memory, already in dialogue with the more general framework of the cognitive neuroscience research on memory, was "After the Archive: Remapping Memory" (BROCKMEIER, 2010). BROCKMEIER's new book "Beyond the Archive" can be seen as a continuation of the project outlined in that paper, taking this further, as very much needed, in the context of the current state of the field of memory studies. [1]

2. Structure of the Book

"Beyond the Archive" begins with a preface that prepares the reader for the main thesis of BROCKMEIER's argument: firstly, it seems that the time has come to stop using the archival model to explain how we remember; and secondly, a narrative model can be more appropriate for explaining remembering. The book starts off with a general introduction that invites the reader to appreciate the importance of this new contribution (Chapter 1). The crisis of current memory research explained in Chapter 1 leads to the main aim of BROCKMEIER's book: showing the argument for the death sentence of the archival model (Chapter 2). Chapter 3 explains the origins, history, and evolution of the archival metaphor for understanding memory from the times of classical Greece through to current research in cognitive neuroscience. Chapter 4 shows how the transition to narrative should be made, and the proposed alternative to the archival model. Chapter 5 then uses an example taken from fiction, Ian McEWAN's novel "Saturday" (2005), to illustrate the complexity of autobiographical remembering and how a narrative approach may help us to make sense of it all. In Chapter 6, BROCKMEIER brings to the forefront another important concept: identity (and its relation to narrative as well as language) and the ways in which it interacts with memory. Chapter 7 deals with the very nature of autobiographical remembering arising out of its embeddedness in everyday life. It again uses examples taken from fiction to showcase the point. Chapter 8 introduces the idea of autobiographical time and relates it to how it is organized in narratives. Chapter 9 takes W.G. SEBALD's novel "Austerlitz" (2001) to elaborate the idea of autobiographical time and its intrinsic relationship with narrative time. To conclude, Chapter 10 summarizes the main argument of the book. The archival model of memory structures how we conceptualize our memory processes, or in other words, simply how we remember. Thus, if we adopt the narrative model to understand remembering, the time may have also come to re-consider how to explain, conceptualize, and, in the final analysis, structure memory. [2]

3. The End of the Archival Model

BROCKMEIER provides examples from four different fields in memory studies supporting the claim that the archival model of memory has come to an end: 1. the social and cultural field; 2. the media and technology field; 3. the literary and artistic field; and 4. the biological and neurocognitive field. Research in field (1) has paid particular attention to cases of vicarious memories (remembering memories of others) in inter-generational forms of remembering. This way of looking at remembering leads us to consider the notion, sometimes vague, of collective memory (OLICK, 2008), which does not only involve people remembering with other people but also how they do so in cultural models (SHORE, 1996). Investigations in (2) have shown that highly organized and functional environments facilitate recall performance, from remembering what products to buy at the supermarket by simply navigating the space with a cart, to checking pre-scheduled appointments on a smartphone calendar before making new ones. However, this is not something new. For quite some time, people have relied on external systems to remember. Literary autobiographical narrative (3) has shed light on the ways in which autobiographical remembering can go far beyond the archival model of memory. As BROCKMEIER puts it: "Furthermore we should not forget that it was long before the psychological and neuroscientific research on memory that literature and the arts began to scrutinize critically the traditional picture of memory and to evoke alternative scenarios never seen before" (p.46). And finally (4): the idea that processes of autobiographical remembering are constructive in nature is fundamentally grounded in findings on the interlocking of culture, the mind, and the brain. References to the constructive nature of autobiographical remembering can be found in BARTLETT's influential book "Remembering" (1932), in which he investigated the constructive character and progressive rationalization of exotic stories in a series of re-narrations by English participants according to their cultural schemata. Such findings are in line with the new neurobiological findings in brain plasticity (BROCKMEIER, 2010; EDELMAN, 1989), which show that the brain changes all the time, continuously adapting to new circumstances (BROCKMEIER, 2010). [3]

4. Brain Plasticity

As BROCKMEIER accurately claims, "memories are not documents that are stored on hard disks or in neural engrams, and in the act of recall, reactivated" (p.57). Neuroscientist Yadin DUDAI (2010) has provided evidence against traditional approaches to neural engrams, which are defined as mental impressions of the residual trace of an adaptation made by an organism in response to a stimulus. These "engrams" are considered to be discrete, well-defined long-term memory traces in the brain. DUDAI maintains that brain plasticity allows the generation of "mental time travel and particularly the imagination of future events rather than storing information of past events" (p.37). He adds that brain plasticity and imagination make "engrams" lose much of their singularity because they may be added to a distributed, large, and dynamic society of engrams that come to constitute our memory (DUDAI, 2010). Such findings in neuroscience are elegantly expressed by BROCKMEIER in the

following statement: "[E]ach act of remembering an experience is itself a new experience which, in the very act, subtly transforms the memory of the 'old' experience" (p.57). All the arguments that BROCKMEIER employs to announce the end of the archival model and the subsequent crisis of memory research lead to his narrative model for the understanding of autobiographical remembering. [4]

5. Narrative Model

Autobiographical narratives are verbal elaborations based on conscious remembrances of self-experience. Narratives based on personal experiences are one of the most widespread cultural, cognitive, and linguistic resources used to construct, communicate, and transform autobiographical memories. These assertions made by social and developmental psychologists (e.g., NELSON & FIVUSH, 2004; PASUPATHI, 2001; SKOWRONSKI & WALKER, 2004), already locate narrative in an important place in relation to autobiographical memory. However, even though several scholars have already acknowledged the key role of autobiographical narratives in the formation of autobiographical memories, they have not gone as far as BROCKMEIER's narrative model. Some traces of the encoding, storage, and retrieval of information—key features of the archival model of memory—can still be found in these approaches. As a way of discarding any traces of the archival model, and as an instrument to overcoming the current crisis in memory research, BROCKMEIER proposes the strong narrative thesis in relation to autobiographical remembering:

"I propose that the intricacies of autobiographical meaning-making are not just represented or expressed by narrative, they only come into being through and in narrative. The strong narrative thesis applies to a set of phenomena that only exist due to the specific kind of action that is carried out in acts of narrative meaning construction. A case in point already mentioned is narrative capacity to create complex temporal scenarios that are typical for the autobiographical process. Another phenomenon illustrating the strong narrative thesis is the what's-it-like quality of conscious awareness, which I have described as a critical property of narrative experience" (p.119). [5]

Thus, BROCKMEIER's radical view on the functions of narrative in autobiographical remembering represents an interesting new development of constructivist theories on narrative and human development (i.e., BRUNER, 1987). His view takes the following two claims about the constructive nature of narrative a small step further: firstly, that the meaning-function of autobiographical narratives rests upon the fact that these normally function to understand life-events as systematically related; and secondly, that narrative order in terms of causal and coherent interconnected sequences of episodes, events, and actions may be fundamental to give human experience a sense of meaning and direction (M. GERGEN, 1987). BROCKMEIER clearly wants to replace the archival model, which for more than a century has perhaps been the only widely accepted way of thinking about memory processes. This means that his strong narrative thesis is more than a toolbox to overcome the current crisis in the sciences of memory, as he asks the reader at the end of chapter 10: "Why,

we wonder, can the models, metaphors, and stories guiding the telling and interpretation of memories ultimately not achieve the same power to reframe and, eventually, reorganize the very processes of autobiographical remembering" (p.324). [6]

6. A Minor Critique

It is important to re-visit one category of evidence supporting BROCKMEIER's declaration on the end of the archival model of memory: the literary and artistic field. BROCKMEIER's selection was mostly based on literary works produced by some of the world's greatest novelists, writers, and playwrights, including Jane AUSTEN, Samuel BECKETT, Jorge Luis BORGES, Ian McEWAN, Marcel PROUST, and W.G. SEBALD, among others. However, he omitted numerous examples on how popular culture (e.g., movies) assimilates and incorporates, or rejects, new scientific findings on the malleability of memory. Apart from a few exceptions (i.e., "Memento," Christopher NOLAN, 2000), movies from the 1980s to the present generally depict a mix of discredited and widely accepted theories of how memory works. Although movies about memory deficits (e.g., amnesia) and their relation to personal identity are likely to have the effect of emotional arousal on encoding, storage, and retrieval, these movies tend to assume "a storehouse model of memory, which has the virtue of being a recognizable commonplace, avoiding complicated explanations" (VIDAL, 2010, p.409). The storehouse metaphor reproduced in movies implies, to a large extent, the "indestructibility of memory," and that its discrete locations and authenticity are the criteria for a genuine self. In short, the arts have not always challenged the archival model, and this is a point that seems to have gone unnoticed in BROCKMEIER's argument. On numerous occasions, popular culture has worked to strengthen the archival model. [7]

7. Conclusion

BROCKMEIER's elegantly written new book represents an important and much needed contribution to the interdisciplinary field of memory studies. It is significant because it does not just bring together research from the neurosciences, social sciences, and humanities, but also constitutes one of the first attempts at genuine integration—something that has rarely been done before. A minor limitation of the narrative model in relation to its predecessor could be phrased thus: why does autobiographical remembering, although always constructed and mediated by social, cultural, linguistic, and technological resources, often proposes some sort of correspondence with the past, so it can be distinguished, not in the brain but in everyday life, from pure perception and imagination? The archival model, partly due to its reductionist view of remembering, could explain this, so perhaps a possible challenge for the narrative model could be to examine the fact that even though remembering is always a constructive process, operating at multiple time-scales and animated by various kinds of resources, there is often something constant and recurrent involved too, and these are our memories. [8]

References

- Bartlett, Frederic (1932). *Remembering*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brockmeier, Jens (2002). Remembering and forgetting: Narrative as cultural memory. *Culture and Psychology*, 8(1), 15-44.
- Brockmeier, Jens (2010). After the archive: Remapping memory. *Culture and Psychology*, 16(1), 5-35.
- Bruner, Jerome (1987). Life as narrative. *Social Research*, 54(2), 11-32.
- Dudai, Yadin (2010). The engram revisited: On the elusive permanence of memory. In Suzanne Nalbantian, Paul M. Matthews & James L. McClelland (Eds.), *The memory process: Neuroscientific and humanistic perspectives* (pp.29-40). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Edelman, Gerald (1989). *The remembered present: A biological theory of consciousness*. New York: Basic Books.
- Edwards, Derek; Middleton, David & Potter, Jonathan (1992). Toward a discursive psychology of remembering. *The Psychologist*, 5, 56-60.
- Gergen, Mary (1987). Toward a diachronic social psychology: Pointing with more than one finger. In Henderikus J. Stam, Timothy B. Rogers & Kenneth J. Gergen (Eds.), *The analysis of psychological theory: Metapsychological perspectives* (pp.267-279). Washington, DC: Hemisphere.
- McEwan, Ian (2005). *Saturday*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Middleton, David & Edwards, Derek (Eds.) (1990). *Collective remembering*. London: Sage.
- Nelson, Katherine & Fivush, Robyn (2004). The emergence of autobiographical memory: A social cultural developmental theory. *Psychological Review*, 111(2), 486-511.
- Nolan, Christopher (Director) (2000). *Memento* [Motion picture], <http://www.otnemem.com/> [Date of access: August 12, 2016].
- Olick, Jeffrey (2008). From collective memory to the sociology of mnemonic practices and products. In Astrid Erll & Ansgar Nünning (Eds.), *Cultural memory studies: An international and interdisciplinary Handbook* (pp.151-161). Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Pasupathi, Monisha (2001). The social construction of the personal past and its implications for adult development. *Psychological Bulletin*, 127, 651-672.
- Roth, Wolff-Michael; Radford, Luis & LaCroix, Lionel (2012). Working with cultural-historical activity theory. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 13(2), Art. 23, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1202232> [Date of access: June 3, 2016].
- Sebald, Winfried G. (2001). *Austerlitz*. New York: Random House.
- Shore, Bradd (1996). *Culture in mind: Cognition, culture and the problem of meaning*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Skowronski, John & Walker, Richard (2004). How describing autobiographical events can affect autobiographical memories. *Social Cognition*, 22(5), 555-590.
- Vidal, Fernando (2010). Memory, movies, and the brain. In Suzanne Nalbantian, Paul M. Matthews & James L. McClelland (Eds.), *The memory process: Neuroscientific and humanistic perspectives* (pp.395-415). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Author

Lucas M. BIETTI is an Ambizione Fellow of the Swiss National Science Foundation at the University of Neuchâtel. His research interests include collaborative remembering, multi-modal interaction, cultural learning, and distributed cognition.

Contact:

Lucas M. Bietti

Institute of Work and Organizational Psychology
University of Neuchâtel
Rue Emile-Argand 11
CH-2000, Neuchâtel
Switzerland

E-mail: lucas@bietti.org

URL: <http://www.collectivememory.net>

Citation

Bietti, Lucas M. (2016). Review: Jens Brockmeier (2015). Beyond the Archive: Memory, Narrative, and the Autobiographical Process [8 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 17(3), Art. 3, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs160338>.